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QUINN, Frederick.– *In Search of Salt: Changes in Beti (Cameroon) Society, 1880-1960*. New York-Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2006, 175 p.

1 Frederick Quinn has produced a work of varying quality that focuses on the social and to a lesser extent on the political and economic, situations of the Beti people of Cameroon during the first half of the twentieth century. Quinn stipulates that his goal is "to reconstruct Beti society and follow its changes across several decades" and he asserts that the Beti's history "provides a case study of political change in an acephalous, segmentary society" (pp. 10-11). While the work offers nuggets of provocative ethnographic evidence and a straightforward narrative, it lacks a readily identifiable argument and a strong analytic approach.

2 As suggested by the book's stated aim, Quinn is primarily concerned with constructing a teleological narrative of Beti history rather than with meaningfully analyzing the changes in Beti society which the book catalogues. This lack of analysis is exacerbated by the equal absence of a theoretical framework. Quinn unabashedly writes, "Several theoretical works [...] informed my writing, although I do not follow any school of historical or anthropological writing" (p. 9). Instead, the work implicitly hews to an anthropology of the "old school" in which change is presented as occurring in African societies only after these societies are acted upon by European colonial interventions. Indeed, the book subscribes to a range of outdated anthropological and historical tropes,

most particularly those concerned with the maintenance of "social equilibrium", the absoluteness of religious conversion, and the efficacy of colonial bureaucratic practice.

3 The book is divided into seven chapters, accompanied by a substantial introduction, brief conclusion, three appendices, and two annexes. The chapters rely in variable degrees on (under-interrogated) narratives gleaned from French colonial archives and on Quinn's condensations of ethnographic evidence. The three appendices are composed of the author's translation of Beti songs collected by a Cameroonian researcher/seminarian and an essay in French on elements of "traditional Beti" society authored by a Cameroonian *abbé,* and Quinn's translation of the essay. These sources would have been put to better use had the significant ethnographic information they contain been integrated into the main text. The same can be said of the data presented in the annexes ; Quinn's articles on the *abbia* stone game and Beti songs.

4 Indeed, this is a deficit which runs through text as a whole. While the introduction focuses strongly on laying out the circumstances and scope of Quinn's intensive anthropological fieldwork, very little of his data is actually present in the main text. The failure to integrate anthropological data by incorporating quotes from informants or even by simply citing interviews when broad contentions about Beti mentalité are mentioned constitutes one of the books primary weaknesses–the reiteration of outmoded tropes.

5 For example, the book casts change in Beti society as occurring with the advent of colonialism and as resulting from colonial interventions. Quinn writes, "[. . .] the most important changes affecting Beti society in the quarter century after the German arrival in 1887 were in response to German initiatives," thereby tacitly suggesting that up until colonial penetration Beti people had existed in a state of ethnographic present (p. 72).

6 Writing on German imperial interventions, Quinn notes that "Part of this process was the Germans saying that African culture was primitive, savage, childish, unevolved, and inferior and many Beti believing it, or at least having serious doubts about the worth and value of their own traditions" (p. 47). Such an assertion is greatly at odds with the overwhelming majority of contemporary scholarship which focuses on how colonized peoples guarded their own cultural practices while appropriating, and in many cases remaking, those of the colonizer. In attempting to make these arguments, Quinn's text would have benefited significantly from the inclusion of specific examples of supporting ethnographic evidence or even from citations to the interviews he conducted.

7 The absence of informant testimony and interview cites renders the book's contentions about religion all too facile as well. Writing on the conversion of an important Beti figure, Quinn enjoins the reader, " Look behind Atangana's newly accepted religious beliefs, and you find a devout convert. This was true of most Beti who became Catholics in large numbers and who became orthodox Christians with few traces of retained indigenous beliefs" (p. 56). Furthermore, according to the text, whether colonial-inspired conversions were cultural or religious, in Beti society they were always complete. Quinn writes, "Beti became Roman Catholics as quickly as German missionaries came their way, and their acceptance of Catholicism seemed complete, void of the syncretism, religious bilingualism, and layering characteristic of other societies" (p. 68). In support of this argument, the text cites statistics on Beti conversion rates (p. 69). However, as scholars have gleaned from analyzing other cases of large-scale conversion, for example that of the Kikuyu in early colonial-era Kenya, rates of conversion and *degrees* of conversion do not necessarily correspond. And the majority of

works on missionization in Africa, for example the Comaroffs' volume *Revelation and Revolution: the Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier (Volume II),* rightly identifies religious conversion as a multi-faceted process of syncretic, two-way appropriations.

8 Ultimately, Quinn seems to disable his own argument that "the Beti accepted Christianity without resistance [. . .]" by suggesting scant lines later, "It is more difficult to ascertain the extent to which Beti society was restructured and the Beti worldview shaped missionary contact" (p. 69). More specifically, his arguments about Beti *catechists de fortune*–figures similar to the "rice Christians" of colonial India–seem to contradict his earlier claims about the complete, uncomplicated, unsullied nature of Beti conversion. He writes, "while there were some exemplary persons among the catechists, many were *catechists de fortune,* opportunists lacking in education and using their influence to gain payment of money, a few chickens, or some fieldwork from the catechumens before the latter were given church membership" (p. 94).

9 The text begins to do a more nuanced work in its discussion of the diminution of the Beti *Sso* rite, but countermands itself with its analysis of the outlawing of widow and slave funereal sacrifice. On colonial efforts to abolish the *Sso* rite, Quinn writes, "to declare a rite illegal is different from actually abolishing it. What appears to have happened is that the *Sso* diminished over a decade or so as the administration-missionary presence spread" (p. 70). Yet, nonetheless, while the reader would expect that this claim be supported by substantial archival evidence, the text references–but does not cite–"Yaoundé oral accounts" and mentions–but does not–quote a colonial-era ethnographic treatise *(ibid.).*

10 Further, the text argues that "it is likely that widow and slave sacrifice at funerals ceased completely during the German colonial period, for later French administrative reports do not cite" (p. 71). This view elides the important point that across Africa practices which were outlawed because they failed the colonial "repugnancy" test did not "cease," but instead often went underground.

11 Overall, this text would be of interest to scholars interested in a chronology of Beti history. And, the introduction would be helpful to professors preparing students to do their first field visits. For those seeking of well-supported analysis of change in Beti societies, a return primary sources is in order.